

VISITOR SATISFACTION AND VISITOR UNDERSTANDING OF THE SIGNIFICANCE OF ACADIA NATIONAL PARK

Meeting the Requirements of the Government Performance and Results Act



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Abstract

In 1998, the National Park Service measured visitor satisfaction and visitor understanding of the significance of the park they were visiting through a brief visitor survey. Acadia National Park participated in this survey, which was intended to meet the requirements of the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA).

The University of Idaho Cooperative Park Studies Unit presented the results of visitor evaluations of park facilities, services, and recreation opportunities (GPRA goal IIa1) at Acadia in a brief report. Ninety-five percent of visitors were satisfied with the overall quality of visitor facilities, services, and recreation opportunities at Acadia, well above the GPRA servicewide goal of 80% by 2002. Answers to questions about the quality of specific facilities or services, such as campgrounds, restrooms, the park map and commercial services showed there is room for limited improvement.

Visitor responses to the question about the significance of Acadia National Park (GPRA goal IIb1) were compared to significance statements identified in the park's GPRA plan. According to servicewide standards for evaluating answers to this question (visitor identification of at least one park significance item), 82.7% of Acadia visitors understand something about the significance of Acadia. This is again well above the servicewide standards of 60% by 2002. Two thirds of visitors knew Acadia was significant for its scenery and nearly one-third knew it was significant for its recreation opportunities. Very few mentioned the park's cultural or natural resources. Visitor comments were helpful in refining park significance statements for future GPRA visitor surveys.

When given the opportunity to make other comments, visitors mentioned improvements to rest rooms and trail signing, enjoying the Jordan Pond House, and never tiring of Acadia after many park visits. A few wanted bike and canoe rentals or more food service in the park. Six specifically mentioned crowding or congestion as a problem.

Recommendations emerging from the data include revisions to the park's GPRA goals based on existing levels of satisfaction and understanding of significance, and emphasizing the value of the cultural and biological resources of the park through education.

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INTRODUCTION

In 1998, the National Park Service (NPS) measured visitor satisfaction at Acadia National Park and visitor understanding of the significance of Acadia National Park through a brief survey card administered to a sample of visitors. Satisfaction and understanding of significance had been identified as two important servicewide goals established by the NPS to satisfy the requirements of the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA).

In this report, the data from the Visitor Survey Card Data Report (see attached Appendix) prepared by the University of Idaho Cooperative Park Studies Unit will be reviewed. The Idaho report presents the results of very general visitor evaluations of park facilities, services, and recreational opportunities. This report will also present and analyze the results for the open-ended part of the survey card that asks visitors to tell why Acadia is significant and give any other comments they wish.

METHODS

Survey methods were established by the University of Idaho for all park units. At Acadia, four hundred survey cards were distributed on eight days between August 1 and August 31 at eight different locations (fifty for each). Distribution of cards was evenly divided between weekends and weekdays and two blocks of time, 8:00 a.m. to noon and 1:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m. Locations, days, dates, and times are in Table 1.

Locations were selected for their high visitation, but there were several other considerations. Because of the division of the park and Mount Desert Island into an east and west side, we selected five locations on the more heavily visited east side and two on the less visited west side. The eighth location consisted of Blackwoods Campground on the east side and Seawall Campground on the west side. Twenty-five survey cards were distributed in each campground.

Three locations on the East Side were high use frontcountry sites. The other two locations on the East Side were high use backcountry trail and carriage road sites. The carriage road intersection selected was between the high and low use areas on the carriage road system. The trail junction selected represents moderately difficult to difficult trails with high use. Jordan Pond was selected as an East Side frontcountry site because of the concession there and the multitude of activities available (hiking, biking and boating). Echo Lake Beach was selected because it was a high use frontcountry area on the West Side where the primary activity was going to the beach and a secondary activity was hiking. Ship Harbor and Wonderland Trails were selected because they were easy trails and they represented frontcountry users of the Rt. 102A corridor with its easily accessible park attractions.

Surveyors contacted visitors on a frequency of every third person or vehicle if more than 100 visitors were expected in the four hours and every person or vehicle if less than 100 visitors were expected in the four hours (see Table 1).

Table 1: Location, Day, and Time for 1998 GPRA Card Distribution.

Location	Day	Time	Freq.
Entrance Station	8/11/98, Tuesday	8:00 – 12:00	3rd
Echo Lake Beach parking lot	8/12/98, Wednesday	1:00 – 5:00	every
junction of the Beehive and Gorham Mountain Trails	8/15/98, Saturday	1:00 – 5:00	every
the Visitor Center	8/16/98, Sunday	8:00 – 12:00	3rd
Intersection 10 on the carriage roads	8/20/98, Thursday	1:00 – 5:00	3rd
Jordan Pond area parking lots	8/22/98, Saturday	1:00 – 5:00	3rd
Ship Harbor and Wonderland Trailheads	8/23,24,25/98, Sunday, Monday, Tuesday	8:00 – 12:00	every
Seawall and Blackwoods Campgrounds	8/28/98, Friday	8:00 – 12:00	3rd

Two Friends of Acadia ridgerunners, a park volunteer, and the park recreation specialist distributed survey cards. At Echo Lake Beach on 8/12/98, the surveyor contacted every vehicle instead of every third vehicle as planned. The reason was poor weather. At Wonderland and Ship Harbor because of poor weather and low visitation on Sunday, we returned to the same location(s) on Monday and Tuesday. Only one person contacted refused a survey card because they did not speak English.

RESULTS

VISITOR SATISFACTION (GPRA GOAL IIA1)

The data presented in the Idaho report is mostly self-explanatory. The most important result was that 95% of visitors were satisfied overall with the quality of appropriate facilities, services, and recreation opportunities. This is well above the 1998 GPRA goal of 77% and the 2002 GPRA goal of 80%. The response rate was 23% (92 survey cards). This response rate is adequate and typical of those from the private sector. The data are accurate to plus or minus 6% with 95% confidence. This means that if different samples had been drawn, the results would have been similar (+/- 6%) 95 out of 100 times.

Although the 400 cards were distributed at specific locations all over the park to obtain a representative sample, we don't know where the 92 returned survey cards were given out. Even though the data are reliable, some caution is advised. The evaluations are very general. For example, rest rooms had the lowest overall evaluation score (3.9). Were people evaluating the condition of rest rooms they used or the lack of rest rooms in certain locations? Maybe two years from now the park will have a better idea with all the new rest rooms in place. Since campground and picnic areas were evaluated together, we don't know which of them contributes most to the second lowest evaluation score (4.2).

We sampled in the campgrounds but not the picnic areas, and based on the open-ended comments about the campgrounds, a good guess is that they are the source of the problems. Remember however, this is still a very good evaluation of these facilities. It just shows areas where improvements can be made. The same is true of other items, and that is perhaps the most important result of the analysis of visitor satisfaction.

For commercial services in the park, it must be assumed that most visitors were evaluating the Jordan Pond House and Wildwood Stables, and that most of those were for the Pond House, because that was where sampling occurred and it is probably used more by visitors than Wildwood. Some respondents may have been evaluating other commercial services like National Park Tours, bike rentals, or climbing instruction. Perhaps of note, the highest percentage of “Poor” ratings, 9%, (+/- 6%) was given to commercial services.

SIGNIFICANCE OF ACADIA (GPRA GOAL IIB1)

This question asked visitors “What is the special significance of this park?” They could respond by writing in as many items as they wanted. Their answers were categorized according to a series of four significance statements prepared from the park’s GPRA plan (National Park Service 1997). These statements were followed fairly rigorously. Exact wording was not necessary, but the concept had to be readily apparent from the visitor’s choice of words. This was not always obvious or easy, but most statements clearly fell into one category. If a statement contained one or more ideas that were different, both were used in the analysis.

The four significance statements were:

1. Outstanding scenery – glaciated coastal and island landscape – mountains meet the sea – highest topography along the East coast of North America – Somes Sound the only fjord in the continental U.S.
2. Recreation – only National Park in the Northeast – 56 miles of carriage roads – 130 miles of hiking trails – lake and ocean boating – scenic motor roads.
3. Rich cultural heritage – North American history – French and British settlement – history of park formation, large land donations, visible proponents of conservation – historic hiking trails – historic carriage roads.
4. Natural resources – exceptionally high biological diversity – presence of numerous rare species – unique mix of plant species that are at their northern and southern range limits – abundant wetlands – park lakes serve as water supplies for local communities.

We counted the number of surveys with any response related to the significance of the park. Answers did not have to match any of our four significance statements. We did not count answers here that were unrelated to significance (e.g. “Acadia National Park is obviously well loved and worried over.”). The number of surveys meeting this criterion

was 81. We then counted the number of surveys with at least one match to any of our four significance statements. The number was 67. The percentage of respondents with at least one match was 82.7 (67/81). This far exceeds the servicewide goal of 60% by 2002. Twenty-one percent (n=17) had two or more matches, and one person identified three reasons why Acadia is significant.

A look at which significance items visitors knew is revealing but not surprising. Of the eighty-one visitors responding to this question, two thirds of them (66.7%, n=54) knew Acadia was significant for its outstanding scenery. Thirty-one percent (n=25) knew the park was significant for its recreation opportunities. Two and a half percent (n=2) knew the park was significant for its rich cultural heritage. Six point two percent (n=5) knew the park was significant for its natural resources. (Percentages do not add up to 100 because visitors could give multiple answers.)

Visitors offered many reasons why they felt Acadia was significant that did not match the four significance statements adequately. Their answers showed some things we overlooked. Our analysis of the “no match” comments on significance showed the following.

Comment	Number
Accessibility of park to all users, location.	12
Lack of development/commercialism	5
Well maintained	5
Preservation, especially of coastline.	4
Peace and quiet.	3
Ocean access.	2
Tides.	2
Highly developed compared to most National Parks.	1
A wonderful bargain.	1
Teaching all generations to care for it.	1
Small intimate feeling.	1
Never overcrowded.	1
Nature at its best.	1
Excellent supporting services.	1

Based on these “no match” comments and overall survey results, we recommend the following changes the significance statements. New wording is in bold print, and there have been some deletions also.

1. Outstanding scenery – glaciated coastal and island landscape – mountains meet the sea – highest topography along the East coast of North America – Somes Sound the only fjord in the continental U.S. – **preservation from development , especially the coastline – geology (as relates to topography) – tides.**

I think these new items are most related to scenery. Nine visitors mentioned preservation or lack of development as significant.

2. Recreation Opportunities – many activities available – carriage roads, trails, hiking, biking, boating – scenic motor roads – **park accessible to all users – public shoreline access – peace/quiet/solitude.**

I think these new items are related to recreation opportunities. Twelve visitors mentioned accessibility. They are right in saying it makes this park unique and significant.

3. Rich cultural heritage – **Native** American history – French and British settlement – history of park formation, large land donations, visible proponents of conservation – historic hiking trails – historic carriage roads.

North American should have been Native American. A word about the “matching” process for this significance item is needed. When visitors mentioned carriage roads or trails, it was considered a recreation match unless they said more. If they mentioned something about construction, like rock steps or stone bridges (as one visitor did), then we classified the response as matching rich cultural heritage. One person mentioned John D. Rockefeller Jr. We considered that a cultural match. Those were the only two matches.

4. **Biological/ecological** (Natural) resources – **any mention of flora or fauna** – exceptionally high biological diversity – presence of numerous rare species – unique mix of plant species that are at their northern and southern range limits – abundant wetlands – **variety of habitats and communities.**

Here we deleted reference to lakes as public water supplies. When most people mention lakes they are probably talking about scenery. On the other hand, the mention of wetlands usually means someone understands their ecological value. Few visitors are likely to know the details of biodiversity, rare species etc. We could make it our goal to educate them about these things. But based on the few answers given about biological resources, *any* mention of the park as a repository for flora and fauna would be an improvement. A general significance statement is more appropriate for biological resources, at least for now. If we can make improvements based on the more general statement, then we might think about establishing a more challenging goal.

SUMMARY OF OTHER COMMENTS

Visitors provided many comments in the final section of the survey card. We established seven categories of comments as described below and grouped comments in the appropriate category. Under each heading, visitor comments are reported as written with only minor editing. A semi-colon separates the comments of each individual. We provide a summary for some categories.

Facilities and Maintenance

label hiking trails better with name, difficulty, mileage; better sign to lead on to one way road at Sieur De Monts; mark trails better; clean up and improve bathrooms at Sand Beach; better rest room facilities at Thunder Hole; bathrooms, especially at Sand Beach need much attention; more bathrooms and parking at Jordan Pond House; trail markings inadequate at trailheads-miles were not always posted; part of the loop road needs repaving; wonderful trail markings; some trails need repainting; trailheads need to be more clearly marked;

There were five comments related to trail improvements and four about rest rooms.

Concessions

love the Pond House; Pond House and popovers were all I hoped it would be; we love the Jordan Pond House;

Campgrounds

people assigning campsites should know different RVs and their needs; would like hot showers in campground; campground a disgrace-sites too close-no peace and quiet-state campgrounds far superior-worst I've seen; hot showers; more privacy of sites; showers-covered pavilion for rainy days; benches and toilets in bathrooms; showers in CG-showers not enough for BWCG; Destinet reservations says you can come here only 14 nights at a time-but you may come again later for another 14 nights-the rangers tell you any camper may only come for a total of 14 nights during the busy season-being friendly the rangers know us so we can't come alone and with other people later; how about showers in campground;

There were five comments requesting showers in the campground (mostly Blackwoods) and two complaints about the privacy of sites at Blackwoods.

Resource Management

wish there was more wildlife-unlikely in Aug, at height of vacation season; too many bees at the picnic areas; we saw a beaver at the Tarn and the peregrines; indicate where fishing is legal in your ponds on your map and brochure; do more to encourage wildlife, birdlife;

General Impressions

3rd visit great as first; never run out of things to do after 34 years; thoroughly enjoyable stay; great place, great employees; never tire of Mt Desert; we will return; it gets better every year; a very special and beautiful place; come every year and have a great time; we'll be back-had a wonderful time; outstanding; reminds me of walking on the lava in Hawaii; we'll be back; there are some tourists who have no respect for nature-they throw their trash anywhere-there should be fines for those who do not carry their trash out; very clean park; we hope to return; we very much enjoyed our visit; Acadia makes the outdoors fun; still aren't tired of Acadia after 14 years; beautiful and clean-more federal money should be spent this way; Acadia lovely-been coming here 30 years; we're happy to support the park (\$) but maybe there should be a 1,2, or 5 day pass w/ varying price for park entrance;

Congestion/Crowding/Visitor Experience

one way road a great idea; the secret is out, the crowds are coming; road is dangerous at times-people park and walk heedlessly-kids are at peril; more carriage roads open to biking; encourage more use of bike helmets; environmental impact of congestion in and around park concerns me, what can we do to allow all to use and not destroy; carriage roads are incredible for hiking, biking; beaches too crowded-maybe you could blast out a mile of so of Otter Cliffs and haul in some sand; get those big RVs off the loop road-they are a menace; very crowded-I will go to SWH and other side of island next time (Aug Sat visit); I like the cliff trails with the ladders-Beech Cliffs; there is so much traffic in the park perhaps shuttle buses to trails or points of interest would help; the park is overcrowded-traffic jams and crowds of people detracted from the overall experience; physical disability precludes many previous activities, however there are enough easy activities to occupy us; entrances are confusing-hard to tell if you are in the park; the around mountain carr rd has a spectacular 360 degree view; need safe place to walk along park road-also for bikes; some place on roads it's not safe for cars to pass bikes safely; for closed carriage roads going east to JP post signs at entrances so alternate routes can be taken;

There were six comments about congestion and crowding.

Services Needed

Wish the park had rental canoes; need more food places-Jordan Pond House too long a wait-no other place to eat; sell food at Sand Beach; bike and canoe rentals in park; more ranger presence to enforce rules and regs; bike rentals in park;

People mentioned bike and canoe rentals and food service.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The 1998 GPRA survey showed that Acadia National Park exceeded the national goals for satisfaction (IIa1) and significance (IIb1) by a large amount. We recommend the following refinement of these goals.

For satisfaction, we are not likely to improve on the overall measure of 95% satisfaction without a great deal of effort for a small amount of gain. Instead we should focus on improving one or more specific facilities, services, or recreation opportunities. Rest rooms, the park map, and trail signs are possible candidates since their evaluations were among the lower ones and many visitors commented on them when offered the opportunity.

For significance, we should probably raise the bar from 60% to 80% (we exceeded 80% this year) and focus on improving visitor understanding of our biological resources and rich cultural heritage. Visitors know Acadia is significant for its scenery and recreation opportunities. Inclusion of our mission statement in as many publications as possible and posting it prominently in public contact areas is one of many actions that may help with this. There are more, and they may not be too difficult to work in to programs and other educational media.

Finally, we are not going to implement all of the things that visitors want. They will continue to want these things unless we tell them, in some way, why we will not respond to them. A one page summary of a few of these things - why we will not build more parking at the Jordan Pond House or anywhere else, why we don't want showers in the campground, why we won't rent bikes or canoes in the park, why we won't put mileages on trails and road signs – could be made available to visitors. It would help them understand how the park is managed.

REFERENCES

National Park Service

- 1997 Strategic management plans: Acadia National Park, St. Croix Island International Historic Site, Maine Acadian Culture Project. U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service. 72pp.